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NEPAL GENERAL ELECTIONS TODAY, HOPES TO USHER IN POSITIVE CHANGE

In a big moment for the Himalayan nation, millions will turn out to vote in the first election to be held after the deadly Gen Z protests

RAPPER TURNED POLITICIAN BALEN RUNS FOR P.M.

Rastriya Swotantra Party (RSP) led by Ravi Lamichhane and senior leader Balendra Shah and reformed Nepali Congress (Gagan Thapa) are voicing for issues raised by the Gen Z. CPN-UML led by K P Oli and Nepali Communist Party are known as the traditional forces. RSP has projected former Kathmandu Mayor and popular rapper Shah as PM candidate

MILLIONS WILL CAST VOTE ON THURSDAY

- More than 18.9 million eligible Nepalese will exercise their franchise to elect 275 member House of Representatives (HoR) from among 3,406 candidates for 165 seats
- Apart from the HoR polls, 110 seats will be decided through proportionate voting. As many as 3,135 candidates are in the race

275
THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS IN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CHENNAI ▪ MADURAI ▪ VIJAYAWADA ▪ BENGALURU ▪ KOCHI ▪ HYDERABAD ▪ VISAKHAPATNAM ▪ COIMBATORE ▪ KOZHIKODE ▪ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM ▪ BELAGAVI ▪ BHUBANESWAR ▪ SHIVAMOGGA ▪ MANGALURU ▪ TIRUPATI ▪ TIRUCHY ▪ TIRUNELVELI ▪ SAMBALPUR ▪ HUBBALLI ▪ DHARMAPURI ▪ KOTTAYAM ▪ KANNUR ▪ VILLUPURAM ▪ KOLLAM ▪ TADEPALLIGUDEM ▪ NAGAPATTINAM ▪ THRISSUR ▪ KALABURAGI

U.S. LOOKS TO ARM KURDISH MILITIAS TO JOIN CONFLICT

SHYAM BHATIA
Senior journalist based in London, author of Nuclear Rivals in the Middle East

REPORTS from Washington indicate that American officials are discussing the possibility of supporting Kurdish militias and other Iranian opposition groups as tensions with Tehran intensify. According to reporting by *CNN* and *The Wall Street Journal*, US officials have explored contacts with Kurdish leaders operating near the Iranian border. The idea — reportedly under discussion within the CIA and the White House — would involve backing Kurdish forces along the mountainous frontier between Iraq and western Iran.

The discussion points to a deeper dilemma confronting American planners. Air strikes can damage nuclear facilities, but eliminating a nuclear programme entirely is far more difficult.

Iran's nuclear infrastructure was deliberately designed after the Iraq experience to be dispersed, hardened and difficult to destroy from the air. Facilities such as the Natanz Nuclear Facility and the deeply buried Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant form part of a network intended to survive aerial attack. Some enrichment facilities, including Fordow, were constructed deep inside mountains — estimates suggest roughly 80 to 90 metres beneath rock — precisely to withstand bombing campaigns.

Iran has also accumulated significant stocks of enriched uranium. According to reporting by the International Atomic Energy Agency, some material has been enriched to levels approaching 60 per cent purity — still short of weapons-grade but far closer to it than ordinary civilian enrichment. Such material could potentially be enriched further if facilities survived or were rebuilt.

As former IAEA director general Mohamed ElBaradei once remarked when discussing nuclear proliferation, "you cannot bomb knowledge."

History offers a revealing precedent. After the Gulf War, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Special Commission began one of the most intrusive disarmament operations ever attempted. Teams spent years tracking down and dismantling Iraq's nuclear infrastructure.

Facilities missed during the bombing campaign were gradually uncovered through inspections, document seizures and interviews with Iraqi scientists.

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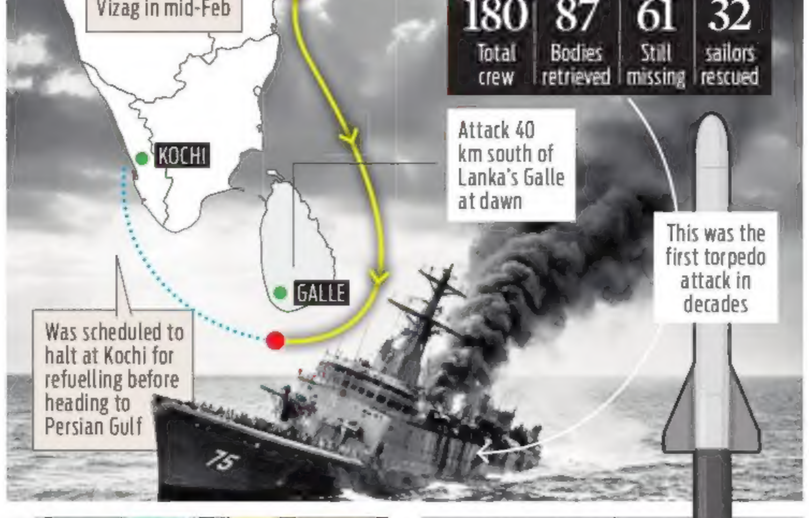
TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT
IRIS Dena had participated in Indian Navy's International Fleet Review and multinational Exercise Milan off Vizag in mid-Feb
VIZAG
KOCHI
GALLE
Attack 40 km south of Lanka's Galle at dawn
Was scheduled to halt at Kochi for refuelling before heading to Persian Gulf
This was the first torpedo attack in decades
IRIS Dena
180 Total crew
87 Bodies retrieved
61 Still missing
32 sailors rescued
75

Lankan healthcare workers carry the bodies of Iranian sailors who died in the attack | AFP

Videograb shows periscope footage of a US submarine firing on and sinking IRIS Dena | AFP

MEA SETS UP CONTROL ROOM

The MEA has established a dedicated control room in Delhi to assist distressed Indian nationals across the Gulf region and neighbouring countries. A look

DELHI CONTROL ROOM NUMBERS: 9AM TO 9PM

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OVER 100 KILLED AS U.S. SUB TORPEDOES IRAN FRIGATE

Day's developments

Trump says US Navy ready to escort oil tankers, adding America would offer shippers insurance

US Senate to vote on first resolution aimed at curbing Trump's authority to continue military strikes on Iran

Tanker traffic through Strait of Hormuz down 90%, says Kpler

Number of ballistic missiles fired by Iran down 86% from Day 1 of conflict, drone launches too dip, says US

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's funeral due on Wednesday evening postponed

Spain PM refuses to let the US use its bases for war against Iran; relents after Trump threatens to cut off bilateral trade

Canada PM Mark Carney says US-Israeli strikes on Iran inconsistent with international law

Iran ballistic missile heading toward Turkish airspace via Iraq and Syria destroyed by NATO air defence systems

JAVARIA RANA @ New Delhi

AN Iranian Navy frigate that had participated in the Indian Navy's International Fleet Review and the multinational Exercise Milan in Visakhapatnam in mid-February was struck by a torpedo fired by a US Navy nuclear-powered attack submarine in the Indian Ocean Region early Wednesday, amid the escalating conflict involving the US, Israel and Iran.

"Yesterday, in the Indian Ocean, an American submarine sank an Iranian warship that thought it was safe in international waters. Instead, it was sunk by a torpedo, quiet death. The first sinking of an enemy ship by a torpedo since World War II (sic)," US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said on Wednesday. Torpedos were in play during the Falklands War in 1982 and the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

WAR WATCH

The vessel, IRIS Dena, issued a distress call south of Sri Lanka soon after the strike, triggering a search and rescue operation in which 32 injured sailors were evacuated out of a crew of 180. The frigate was on its return voyage to Iran after participating in the naval engagements hosted by India when it reported the emergency at dawn. It is learnt the vessel was scheduled to halt at Kochi for refuelling before beginning its onward passage westward towards the Persian Gulf.

The vessel was about 40 nautical miles south of Galle, just outside Sri Lanka's territorial waters, when it issued the distress call. The Sri Lanka Navy dispatched ships and aircraft, while the Sri Lanka Air Force joined the rescue effort to evacuate sailors from the vessel.

Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath told Parliament that the injured sailors were transported to various hospitals. Lankan Navy spokesperson, Buddhika Sampath further said the response was under the country's international maritime obligations. "We responded to the distress call under our international obligations as this falls within Sri Lanka's Search and Rescue Area in the Indian Ocean," he said.

Responding to a query from The New Indian Express earlier, the US Embassy spokesperson in New Delhi had said the US Navy destroyer USS Pinckney, an Arleigh Burke-class warship slated to participate in the International Fleet Review and Exercise Milan, did not attend the events due to emergent operational requirements. The US Navy instead deployed a P-8 maritime patrol aircraft for the engagements.

The destroyer had departed Singapore on February 11 after repairs.

The Chief of the Iranian Navy, Rear Admiral Shahram Irani, had also travelled to Vizag for the engagements, attending the International Fleet Review, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Conclave of Chiefs and Exercise Milan hosted by the Indian Navy.

Farmer Mahadev at his chia farm

Hit by wildlife raids, farmers in Kushalnagar opt to grow chia

PRAJNA GR @ Madikeri

ABANDONED farmlands along forest fringes are a common sight in South Kodagu, as farmers often struggle with crop loss due to raids by wild elephants and boars. But farmers in the Kushalnagar belt have found a promising solution, growing chia seeds.

A low-maintenance, high-value crop, chia is now being successfully harvested by farmers across Maruru, Chinnehalli and 6th Hoskote in Kushalnagar taluk, offering significant returns. The trend began when a local farmer earned substantial profits from chia, while others suffered losses due to wildlife conflict and adverse weather.

"Mahesh, a farmer from Maruru, started cultivating chia about eight years ago. Once others realised that this crop is largely safe from wildlife raids, many farmers adopted it," said KS Murthy, a farmer from Kudige. Local farmers learned the cultivation process from Mahesh and others, sparking wider adoption in the region. **P7**

Big buzz on Nitish shifting to the RS

RAMASHANKAR @Patna

BIHAR Chief Minister and JD(U) boss Nitish Kumar, who ruled the state for more than 20 years, may be nominated to the Rajya Sabha, paving the way for the BJP to finally have its own CM in the state. That could open the door for the appointment of Nitish's son Nishant Kumar, whose entry into politics was announced on Tuesday, as the deputy CM.

The buzz is that nomination papers for Nitish's Rajya Sabha bid are ready, with only his signature pending. He is expected to file his papers around 11 am on Thursday, the last day for doing so.

JD(U) national working president Sanjay Kumar Jha discussed it with Nitish at the latter's official residence in Patna for nearly three hours. He was reportedly persuading him to move to the Rajya Sabha.

Senior JD(U) leader and Union minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lalan Singh is expected to reach Patna from Delhi on Thursday morning. All NDA legislators have also been asked to reach Patna by Thursday. Nitish could be rewarded with a major ministry in the Union cabinet if he goes to the Upper House.

If the switch happens, deputy CM and BJP leader Samrat Choudhary could be elevated as the new chief minister. It is believed that the next CM will be of Nitish's choice as the BJP would not like to send any wrong message or create a perception that it had any role in persuading him to move to the Rajya Sabha.

EXPRESS READ

Dhoni fined Rs 1,000 for overspeeding in Ranchi

Ranchi: Former India cricket captain Mahendra Singh Dhoniwas fined Rs 1,000 for overspeeding after his car was recorded travelling at 91 kmph. The incident took place in his hometown Ranchi on March 1 | **P12**

HM dies of cardiac arrest while teaching a class

Hassan: A 53-year-old headmaster of a government primary school died of cardiac arrest in a classroom in Kebbekoppalu village on Tuesday. Satish collapsed suddenly during class leaving students in shock | **P5**

15% US tariff by this week, says Bessent

New Delhi: The proposed tariff of 15% (up from 10%), across-the-board by the US administration is expected to be effective later this week, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said on Wednesday during a media interaction | **P15**

Budget: CM may up excise revenue target to ₹45Kcr

BALA CHAUHAN @Bengaluru

BUOYED by the revenue collection by the Excise Department, CM Siddaramaiah is likely to increase its revenue target to around Rs 45,000 crore for FY 2026-2027 in the budget from Rs 40,000 crore in the previous fiscal, highly placed sources said.

The department is gearing up to overachieve the last fiscal target of Rs 40,000 crore to a little over Rs 41,000 crore by the month-end. As on March 2, the department had collected Rs 36,500 crore, and the department is hopeful of mopping up Rs 4,000 to Rs 5,000 crore by March 31, sources said.

Achieving heightened revenue targets does not necessarily suggest increased alcohol consumption. On the contrary, alcohol consumption is said to have slowed down in the last couple of years in Karnataka.

Last year, the CM had raised the Additional Excise Duty (AED) on the first four slabs (with lowest MRP) of Indian Made Liquor (IML) by Rs 15. It is these first four slabs that contribute 80-85% towards the total excise revenue in Karnataka. The increase in AED on IML and beer may have impacted alcohol consumption but it bulked up the state revenue.

Alcohol for human consumption is not covered under the Goods and Services Tax, allowing states to retain the power to levy their own excise duty and Value Added Tax (VAT) on it, thereby helping them to maintain revenue and fiscal autonomy. This perhaps helps explain why subsequent governments in the state have been taxing alcohol, including beer, and justifying the steep annual increase in the excise revenue targets. In 2016, the revenue target for excise was Rs 16,500 crore. If the revision for 2026-27 is pegged at Rs 45,000 crore, it would be an increase by 150% since 2016.

50 held in Ballari in 2 months for diverting PDS rice

KIRAN BALANNANAVAR @ Ballari

IN a major crackdown on the illegal diversion of public distribution system (PDS) rice, the police in the undivided Ballari district have arrested more than 50 individuals over the past two months for their alleged involvement in the unlawful transportation and sale of subsidised foodgrains.

Official sources said nearly 5 tonnes of PDS rice was seized during multiple raids carried out across the district. The operations were conducted based on information that foodgrains supplied under government welfare schemes were being diverted.

Preliminary investigations indicated that the accused were transporting the rice to neighbouring Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where there is reportedly higher demand in the open market. **P7**

T20 WORLD CUP

Mumbai high: Upbeat India set for tactically sound England challenge

India head coach Gautam Gambhir in Mumbai on Wednesday | DEBADATTA MALLICK

GOMESH S @ Mumbai

THE moment one turns towards towards the Anshuman Gaekwad gate of the Wankhede Stadium from Marine Drive, one can witness relentless hustle. Cars were lined up as fans standing in groups were enquiring about availability of tickets. Excitement was palpable. And rightly so, two sides with considerable pedigree and history would be locking horns for a coveted place in the T20 World Cup final against New Zealand on Sunday.

As expected, the semifinal between India and England is drawing a lot of attention. Such is the enormity of the occasion and India are looking beyond practice to win that match, even if it required to invoke the divine. Nothing can be left for chance. The team even postponed practice by an hour on Tuesday so that they do not train during the inauspicious moments of Lunar Eclipse. Bowling coach Morne Morkel confirmed it.

And when they did come out to train on Tuesday each individual put in that extra effort to chisel those rough edges. Three hours of intense rituals and entire house was in attendance -- Sanju Samson, Hardik Pandya, Tilak Varma, skipper Suryakumar Yadav, Washington Sundar. In fact, Pandya batted for more than two hours straight and well past 10 PM.

England work through stealth and guile. They exhibited the trait in Sri Lanka where tactics mattered more than slam-bang batting. Their skipper Harry Brook is in good knick and is ably supported by the likes of Will Jacks, Sam Curran and the ilk.

Going by the current form and trend, Gautam Gambhir-coached side cannot put a foot wrong. The first semifinal in Kolkata was one-sided as New Zealand whacked South Africa out of WC. Hopefully, the second will be a cracker. **P17**